

Some Thoughts on Framing the Work of the Commission and the National Dialog

Primary Goal

To assess the higher education needs of the nation and recommend strategies for addressing them.

Possible Elements

- The essential role of higher education in contributing to economic prosperity, public health, social well-being, and national security.
- The responsibility of America's colleges and universities to provide broad access to high quality, affordable higher education.
- The ability of the nation's universities to provide the world-class research and innovation, outstanding scientists, engineers, and other knowledge professionals, and the world-class research and learning infrastructure necessary for the nation to sustain its leadership in a global, knowledge-driven economy.
- The capacity of higher education to adapt to changes driven by forces such as the emerging knowledge economy, globalization, rapidly evolving technologies, an increasingly diverse population, and an evolving marketplace characterized by new needs (e.g., lifelong learning), new providers (e.g., for-profit, cyber universities), and new paradigms (e.g., distance learning, open educational resources).
- An enhanced public understanding of the growing importance and changing character of higher education in America.

Background

It is important to understand and respect the multiple roles, unique characteristics, and strengths of higher education in America:

"Beyond the triad mission of teaching, research, and service, universities are the chief agents of discovery, the major providers of basic research that underlines new technology and improved health care. They are the engines of economic growth, the custodians and transmitters of cultural heritage, the mentors of each new generation of entrants into every profession, the accreditors of competency and skills, and the agents of personal understanding and societal transformation." (Rhodes, 1999)

The strength of American higher education depends upon characteristics such as:

- The great diversity among institutions and missions.
- The balance among funding sources (private vs. public, state vs. federal).
- The influence of market forces (for students, faculty, resources, reputation).
- Its global character (attracting students and faculty from around the world)
- The absence of a centralized system that leads to highly decentralized, market-sensitive, and agile institutions, students, and faculty.
- Supportive policies (academic freedom, institutional autonomy, tax and research policies).
- The research partnership between universities, the federal government, and industry.

Possible Issues

1. The Changing Needs of the Nation

“The flattening of the world is moving ahead apace, and nothing is going to stop it. What can happen is a decline in our standard of living if more Americans are not empowered and educated to participate in a world where all the knowledge centers are being connection. We have without our society all the ingredients for American individuals to thrive in such a world, but if we squander these ingredients, we will stagnate.” (Thomas Friedman, 2005)

We have entered an era in which educated people, the knowledge they produce, and the innovation and entrepreneurial skills they possess have become the keys to economic prosperity, public health, social well-being, and national security. Moreover education has also become a key determinant of one’s personal standard of living and quality of life. In the knowledge economy, it has become the responsibility of democratic societies to provide all of their citizens with the educational and training opportunities they need, throughout their lives, whenever, wherever, and however they need it, at high quality and at affordable prices.

2. Access to higher education

“As higher education becomes increasingly important to one’s personal standard of living and quality of life, it is important that opportunities for access and education should breach the boundaries and burdens of race, class, poverty, and geography.” (Vest, 2005)

How accessible is higher education today? Is this changing?
(e.g., strong dependence of participation on income)

The transition from high school to college:

Are high school objectives congruent with college admissions criteria?

Are students adequate prepared?

How (or who) should handle the socialization of young people?

Do students have access to the institutions best suited to their needs and abilities? (Socioeconomic, geographic constraints)

How effective is public support in providing opportunity?

(e.g., state appropriations, federal financial aid, tax policy)

What about new students and new paradigms?

(e.g., adults, for-profit providers, distance learning, new pedagogies)

3. Affordability of higher education

“The traditional model of higher education finance in the U.S. with large state subsidies to public higher education and modest means-tested grants and loans from the federal government is becoming increasingly untenable”...in the face of unfunded federal mandates such as Medicaid and the priorities of an aging baby boomer population. (Thomas Kane, 2003)

The cost of educating college students (to institutions)

What is the real cost? How fast is it rising? Why?

What can be done? Productivity? Market pressures?

The price of a college education (to parents)

What is the true price (e.g., net of financial aid)?

- How fast is it rising? Why?
- What is the true public subsidy (state, federal, tax policies)?
- The value of a college education (to students, to the nation)
 - What is the quality of higher education in America?
 - What is U.S. higher ed performance? (E.g., graduation rates)
 - How do we benchmark quality? (e.g., USN&WR or OECD?)
- What is the true return on the public and private investment in higher education?

4. Accountability of higher education

“The university is the custodian, not only of knowledge, but also of the values on which that knowledge depends; not only of professional skills, but of the ethical obligations that underlie those professional skills; not only of scholarly inquiry, disciplined learning and broad understanding, but also of the means that make inquiry, learning and understanding possible. In its institutional life and its professional activities, the university must reaffirm that integrity is the requirement, excellence the standard, rationality the means, community the context, civility the attitude, openness the relationship, and responsibility to society the obligations upon which its own existence and knowledge itself depend.” (Glion Declaration, 1999)

- Are we meeting the education needs of the knowledge economy?
 - Providing lifelong learning opportunities to knowledge-intensive jobs
 - Providing public space and convening regional conversations on economic development
- What are the most important roles played by various institutions?
 - Community colleges: upward mobility? workforce needs?
 - Regional universities: broadening opportunities? regional development?
 - Liberal arts colleges: pre-professional? leadership?
 - Proprietary and for-profit institutions: workforce needs?
 - Research universities: knowledge? job creation? professions?
- How well are universities meeting specific national needs?
 - For K-12 teachers and other key professions (e.g., science, engineering)?
 - For science and technological literacy of the broader public?
 - Meeting the needs of adult students?
- How well are U.S. research universities responding to national needs?
- How effective are research universities in knowledge transfer?
 - Technology-based economic development
 - Applied research and professional practice (e.g., health care)

5. Quality, excellence, and leadership in higher education

“In an increasingly competitive, global, knowledge-driven economy, national security, economic prosperity, and social well-being depend increasingly on generating new knowledge through research and innovation; upon scientists, engineers, and other knowledge professionals; through infrastructure such as research universities, laboratories, and cyberinfrastructure; and supportive public policy.” (National Academy of Engineering, 2005)

- Is the leadership of American research universities at risk?
 - From eroding state support (publics)?
 - From changing national science policy?
 - From immigration restrictions?

From intensifying competition from abroad?
 What is the role of the research university in:
 Undergraduate education
 Meeting mass education needs of the nation
 Regional economic development
 Global markets

6. Public policy in higher education

“The solution of virtually every problem with which government is concerned: health, education, environment, energy, urban development, international relationships, space, economic competitiveness, and defense and national security, all depend on creating new knowledge and hence upon the health of America’s universities.” (Erich Bloch, 1988)

Should higher education be viewed primarily as a private benefit, a public good, or a global asset?
 What is the appropriate balance between public policy and public investment and market forces and private investment in the support of higher education in America?
 How important are the public good roles of higher education (e.g., preserving and transmitting our culture, preparing the educated citizenry for a democracy, challenging our norms and beliefs, producing our leaders in the public and private sectors) relative to the individual benefits of students (earning capacity, personal growth)?
 What is the role of American higher education as a global asset?
 Attracting the best and brightest from around the world?
 Contributing to the solution of global challenges?
 Serving as one of America’s most successful “export industries”?

The Approach of the Commission

Although the states and the private sector provide the majority of the support for American colleges and universities, the federal government has had great impact in the past through key policies and investments. Examples include the Land-Grant Acts of the 19th century, the G. I. Bill and government-university research partnership (Vannevar Bush) of the post-World War II years, and the National Defense Education Act of the Cold War years.

The challenge to the Commission is to focus on the right issues, where change is necessary and opportunities exist and where the federal government can have real impact on assisting higher education to respond to the needs of the nation.

A Caution

In its September 10, 2005 issue, *The Economist* summarized the status of higher education in America as follows:

“There is no shortage of things to marvel at in America’s higher-education system, from its robustness in the face of external shocks to its overall excellence. However what particularly stands out is the system’s flexibility and its sheer diversity...It is all too easy to mock American academia. But it is easy to lose sight of the real story: that America has the best system of higher education in the world!”

Hence, while higher education in the United States faces many challenges, responsibilities, and opportunities, it is important that the Commission approach its tasks by heeding the physician's caution: "First...and always...do no harm."